

## "Shakespeare's Creation of Illusion (*Maya*) in *The Tempest*: A Comparative Study with the *Chandogya Upanishad*"

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to comprehend the underlying thoughts between Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* and *Chandogya Upanishad*, a profound philosophical text from ancient India. Despite their differing cultural and philosophical contexts, both works delve into universal truths about the human condition and the nature of existence. The *Upanishad* provides metaphysical and spiritual insights, *The Tempest* dramatizes these themes through human experiences and relationships, creating a bridge between Eastern and Western philosophies.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare employs the interplay of illusion and reality to examine themes of power, transformation, and existence. As Prospero reflects, "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" (4.1.156–158). This poignant observation captures the impermanent and illusory nature of the world, a notion that resonates deeply with the *Upanishadic* concept of *maya*—the illusionary and transient nature of material life. Similarly, the *Chandogya Upanishad* expresses this idea in the verse, "Yathā svapne puruṣaḥ yathā'svapnam prakalpitaṃ" (8.11.1, Easwaran), which compares life to a dream created by the mind. This shared understanding of the fleeting nature of existence finds further reinforcement in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which declares, "Anityam asukham lokam" (9.33, Easwaran), meaning "the world is impermanent and joyless." This paper aims to illuminate these shared insights they offer, deepening our appreciation of their enduring philosophical significance and their unified message about the ephemeral nature of the world and the human quest for purpose.

**Key Words:** Illusion, Reality, Metaphysical, Renunciation And Ethical Living

### Introduction

Shakespeare's works have long served as a timeless source of wisdom, offering profound teachings to humanity. Through his masterful storytelling, he conveyed insights that resonate across cultures and generations. Sometimes subtle and nuanced, at other times more overt and accessible, his messages speak to the complexities of human nature and universal truths. The depth of his characters and the richness of his lines invite readers and audiences to delve deeper, uncovering layers of meaning that continue to inspire and enlighten.

This paper seeks to explore the underlying connections between Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* and the *Chandogya Upanishad*, a seminal philosophical text from ancient India. By comparing *The Tempest* and the *Chandogya Upanishad*, intriguing parallels and contrasts

emerge in their treatment of universal themes such as illusion and reality, self-knowledge, renunciation, and the harmony of existence.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare skilfully intertwines the themes of illusion and reality, examining their interplay through the characters, the magical setting, and the unfolding events of the narrative. While rooted in vastly different cultural and philosophical traditions, both works engage deeply with profound truths about the human condition and the nature of existence. *The Tempest* is a play that is synonymous with the word illusion, and the play starts with the illusion and ends with the illusion, creating much drama in the play.

Prospero, wielding his magical abilities and aided by the ethereal spirit Ariel, crafts intricate illusions throughout the play. These illusions serve as tools for enacting his vision of justice, allowing him to seek revenge on his foes without resorting to violence. Instead, he uses these deceptions to teach them valuable lessons, compelling them to confront their wrongdoings and nurturing their moral growth. At the same time, Prospero's use of illusion becomes a means of reconciliation, enabling him to reclaim his lost dukedom while restoring harmony among the play's characters. Through this interplay, Shakespeare not only advances the narrative but also invites audiences to reflect on the delicate boundary between reality and artifice.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* offers metaphysical and spiritual insights, while *The Tempest* dramatizes these themes through human experiences and relationships, creating a fascinating bridge between Eastern and Western philosophies. Both these works have served humankind in their own way and taught how to lead a life with honesty, righteousness, and interconnectedness and teaching the world what is illusion (maya), which is very glittery to watch and know about it, and the most impermanent one in this world, including the world that is holding the illusion in it, is the illusion.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare uses the vanishing of the spirits as a moment for Prospero to deliver some of the play's most profound reflections on the transient and illusory nature of the world. Through his emotional lines, "The great globe itself, ye all which it inherits, shall dissolve, and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind" (*The Tempest*, 4.1.153-156), Prospero contemplates the impermanence of existence. The world, in his view, is akin to a fleeting illusion—a fragile bubble destined to dissolve. This moment reflects on the fragility of grandeur and the temporary nature of human achievement.

This perspective finds a striking parallel in the Upanishads, where the *Chandogya Upanishad* declares, "Sarvaṁ khalvidam brahma tajjalāniti śānta upāsīta" (3.14.1), which translates to "All this is indeed Brahman; it arises from, exists in, and dissolves into the Divine." Both Shakespeare and the Upanishadic texts present a shared philosophical vision of the world as an ephemeral creation, one that emerges from and ultimately returns to a divine source. While Shakespeare conveys this through vivid theatrical imagery, the Upanishads articulate it in meditative, spiritual terms. Together, these texts offer humankind a timeless understanding of the illusory and ever-changing nature of existence.

The play's recurring motif of illusion versus reality is embodied in Prospero's magical powers, which create elaborate illusions to manipulate others. The line "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" reflects the ephemeral nature of life and reality. Prospero uses his magical powers to bring out the self-transformation in the characters like Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio. Alonso realises his mistake and the injustice done to Prospero and utters, "Thy

dukedom I resign and do entreat Thou pardon me my wrongs. But how should Prospero be living and be here?" (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5.1.118-120). Prospero's illusion is like the Upanishad use of illusion (maya), which brings out the higher truths of the self.

Using the magical powers on Ferdinand, Prospero makes him fall in love with his daughter, and after testing him, he would teach him the duties of a husband and the importance of self-control. Ferdinand understands its importance and says, "The murkiest den, the most opportune place, the strongest suggestion. Our worse genius can, shall never melt mine honour into lust, to take away the edge of that day's celebration. (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4.1.26-30). This shows how Shakespeare taught the world about the importance of following celibacy before the wedding, and the similar teachings are found in the Upanishad, which teaches the disciples who come to the guru, "Indriyāṇām pṛthagbhāvaṁ udayāstamayau ca yaḥ, Pratijñā amṛtaṁ jñātvā sa tena brahmaṇaspatiḥ." (Chandogya Upanishad 8.15.1; Radhakrishnan) Which translates to, "He who knows the distinct nature of the senses, their rising and setting, and the truth behind them, attains mastery over Brahman." It shows how both the texts taught the importance of celibacy to the world using the concepts of illusion, which conveys that the temptations of this transient world are much more common, but they should be controlled by the man to overcome it. Here the Upanishad goes one step above to teach humankind that having the sense of control would make one attain ultimate reality.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare transcends the simplistic notion of revenge, crafting Prospero as a character whose actions are more a measured response to circumstance than impulsive retaliation. From the outset, Prospero's grievances stem from the betrayal of his brother Antonio, who usurped his dukedom when Prospero was vulnerable, caring for his infant daughter. Despite the magnitude of this betrayal, Prospero's approach to addressing the wrongs done to him is strikingly restrained. Through his mastery of magic and the aid of his spirit servant Ariel, Prospero orchestrates events not to destroy his enemies but to hold a mirror to their actions, forcing them to confront their own moral failings.

Ariel's early reassurance that no one aboard the shipwrecked vessel has perished underscores Prospero's intent to use his powers ethically. His designs aim to teach lessons rather than inflict harm. This calculated restraint is particularly evident in his dealings with Antonio, whose character is emblematic of unchecked ambition and moral decay. Antonio's willingness to manipulate Sebastian into murdering his brother, Alonso, is a chilling display of his unrepentant immorality, as revealed in the lines, "True: And look how well my garments sit upon me; much better than before: my brother's servants were then my fellows; now they are my men" (*The Tempest*, 2.1.267-270). Antonio's complete disregard for conscience, symbolized by his dismissal of Sebastian's ethical hesitations, highlights his inability to recognize the sanctity of life. This greed-fueled immorality starkly contrasts with Prospero's deliberate and reasoned actions.

Shakespeare uses the tension between these two characters—Prospero and Antonio—to explore the ethical spectrum of human behavior. Antonio's moral depravity, driven by his insatiable thirst for power, represents the dangerous path of illusion—where material desires cloud judgment and lead to inhuman actions. In contrast, Prospero's eventual renunciation of his magical powers signifies his recognition that true resolution lies not in control or illusion but in reason, forgiveness, and reality. This is poignantly expressed in his lines: "Though with their high wrongs I am struck to the quick, yet with my nobler reason 'gaitist my fury do I take

part” (*The Tempest*, 5.1.25-27). Prospero’s choice to temper his anger with reason encapsulates Shakespeare’s broader commentary on the ethical use of power and the importance of acting with a clear conscience.

This moral awakening finds resonance in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, which similarly emphasizes the pursuit of truth as the path to inner peace. The Upanishadic line, “*Santam enam tattvato viditva śāntim vindati*” (3.14.4), translates to “By understanding the truth, humankind attains peace and harmony.” The philosophical undercurrent in both texts suggests that human life is a constant interplay between ethical and immoral choices, and it is through deliberate alignment with truth and reason that one finds redemption.

Shakespeare further delves into the consequences of moral failings through characters like Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio. Their shared guilt, described in Prospero’s observation, “*All three of them are desperate: their great guilt, like poison given to work a great time after, now 'gins to bite the spirits*” (*The Tempest*, 3.3.104-106), illustrates the long-term psychological toll of unethical actions. The imagery of guilt as a delayed poison evokes the Upanishadic principle articulated in the line, “*Yathākarma yathāśrutam eṣaḥ sa dharmah*” (5.10.7), which conveys that one’s destiny is shaped by their deeds. Just as the Upanishad asserts that actions grounded in illusion lead to spiritual disarray, Shakespeare portrays how Alonso and his conspirators are ensnared by the consequences of their moral failings, ultimately finding resolution only through repentance.

Through this interplay of illusion, reality, and morality, *The Tempest* becomes a timeless exploration of the human condition. Shakespeare’s nuanced portrayal of Prospero as a figure of reason and forgiveness, juxtaposed with Antonio’s embodiment of ambition and amorality, presents a spectrum of human behavior that mirrors the ethical teachings of the Upanishads. Both texts converge on the profound truth that life’s ultimate purpose lies not in the pursuit of power or illusions, but in the alignment of actions with truth, leading to peace, redemption, and harmony.

Towards the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero realizes that his reliance on magic and the creation of illusions has led him to actions he deeply regrets, hindering his ability to achieve true reconciliation and peace. This transformation is touchingly expressed in his resolve to renounce his magical powers: “*Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, and deeper than did ever plummet sound, I’ll drown my book*” (*The Tempest*, 5.1.56-58). By choosing to relinquish his magic, Prospero seeks to align himself with reality and morality.

This sentiment resonates with the wisdom of the Upanishads, which caution against the delusions of the material world that can lead to immoral actions. The *Chandogya Upanishad* states, “*Satyam tattvena kṛtam satyam bhavati; asatyam chānṛtam bhavati*” (6.16.1), meaning, “When actions are aligned with truth, they become truthful; when born from illusion, they become untruthful.” Both Shakespeare and the Upanishadic philosophy highlight the dangers of being ensnared by illusion and emphasize the moral imperative of grounding actions in truth and reality. Together, these timeless works urge humanity to seek clarity and integrity in the face of life’s deceptive allurements.

After delving deeply into the interplay between reality and illusion, this study shifts its focus to the ethical and moral dilemmas that shape human behavior. It explores how individuals often stray toward wrongful paths, driven by an inability to discern illusion from reality. Both

*The Tempest* and the *Chandogya Upanishad* address this universal struggle, albeit through different approaches.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare imparts moral lessons by presenting characters who, initially flawed by greed, betrayal, or cruelty, are guided toward redemption through the consequences of their actions and Prospero's crafted illusions. The play emphasizes the transformative power of self-awareness and repentance in correcting inhumane behavior. Meanwhile, the *Chandogya Upanishad* imparts similar wisdom through a philosophical lens, teaching the virtues of righteousness, self-discipline, and detachment from material desires. By aligning oneself with truth and understanding the illusory nature of worldly attachments, one can lead a virtuous life.

Together, these texts provide profound insights into human ethics, urging individuals to overcome the deceptive allure of illusions and embrace a path of self-awareness, morality, and spiritual growth.

If humankind understands the concept of reality right and leads the life of ethical living, one would automatically choose the path of renunciation. The *Chandogya Upanishad* states that "Yadā sarve pramucyante kāmā ye'sya hṛdī śritāḥ, Atha martyo'mṛto bhavatyetāvaddhyanusāsanam." (*Chandogya Upanishad* 8.12.1; Radhakrishnan) It states that when a person realises the reality and understands the ethical way of living, they would attain the highest state with consciousness. In the play, *The Tempest*, it's very much evident that Shakespeare teaches that it's very much important to follow the path of renunciation through the character Prospero's dialogue: "The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance; they being penitent, the sole drift of my purpose doth extend not a frown further." (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5.1.27-30) He is satisfied with his enemy's good change in nature and accepting the deeds that were done by him and chooses to renunciate his magic powers by uttering, "But this rough magic I here abjure, and, when I have required some heavenly music, which even now I do, to work mine end upon their senses that this airy charm is for, I'll break my staff." (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5.1.50-54) This would show that he is giving up all his powers, knowing very well that he wouldn't perform the tricks that were done by him earlier.

The play starts with the cause of the retention of Prospero's dukedom with his brother Alonso; he becomes the reason for Prospero to attain the magic powers and use the same on them. At the end, Alonso left with nothing but the Prospero, who learnt the art of renunciation and regained his dukedom back with the satisfaction of gaining his share without harming anyone. It teaches that humankind needs to understand the value of renunciation rather than retaining what is not necessary. The concept of revenge to forgiveness is brought out through the character of Prospero, and his renunciation of the magic symbolises the Upanishadic thought of letting go of desires and aligning deeds with greater truths.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* teaches the reality beyond the illusion. Ethical living, righteousness, forgiveness and empathy would emerge as forerunner for renunciation. In the same way Prospero's understanding that virtue wins over vengeance reflects with Upanishadic ideas of sacrificing personal desires for the sake of greater good for everyone. His symbolic act of breaking the magic staff shows the aspects of renunciation of control and attachment, illustrating the ultimate wisdom of detachment.

Timeless applicability of these principles is highlighted in this study, where in the world which is often overpowered with impermanent material cravings and desires. This study is the call to lead a life ethically and transcend unethical desires for a peaceful living. By analysing literary and philosophical aspects of the texts this research not only expands the understanding of Shakespeare and the Upanishads but also offers evolving life for modern times.

The themes of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the Indian Upanishads intersect in profound ways, exploring universal truths about life, existence, and human nature. Here are some common themes: Prospero's journey culminates in forgiveness. Despite being wronged by his brother Antonio, he chooses reconciliation over revenge, embodying a higher moral principle.

The characters' destinies are intricately interconnected, suggesting a larger cosmic order that binds them. Ariel's ethereal presence further emphasizes the unity between the natural and supernatural worlds. The idea of oneness is a core teaching. The *Chandogya Upanishad* declares, "Tat Tvam Asi" (Thou art That), expressing the unity of the individual soul (*Atman*) with the universal spirit (*Brahman*).

Prospero renounces his magical powers and reconciles with the temporal world, signifying a spiritual growth that transcends material desires and control. The practice of *vairagya* (detachment) is a recurring theme. The *Katha Upanishad* advises renunciation of transient pleasures to attain eternal truth.

Thus, *The Tempest* and the Upanishads both grapple with profound philosophical questions about existence, forgiveness, and unity. While *The Tempest* addresses these themes through a Western, human-centred lens, the Upanishads provides a deeply spiritual and cosmic perspective. Together, they offer complementary insights into the human condition and the quest for truth.

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